DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 430 731 PS 027 685

AUTHOR Good, Linda A.
TITLE A Visit to Kindergarten No. 490 in Minsk, Belarus.
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 18p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Environment; Comparative Analysis; Cultural Differences; Educational Environment; Foreign Countries; Health Education; *Kindergarten; *Kindergarten Children; Preschool Curriculum; Preschool Education; *Preschool Teachers; Program Descriptions; Special Needs Students; Teacher Student Relationship; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Belarus

ABSTRACT

Although opportunities for sharing information about early childhood education increased with the disbanding of the Soviet Union in 1991, knowledge about how young children are cared for and educated in countries of the former Soviet Union remains limited. This report presents observations of a kindergarten class in Minsk, Belarus conducted through the auspices of Friendship Force, an international organization striving to promote peace through understanding. The report describes the facilities housing Kindergarten No. 490, including the building, classrooms, sleeping areas, bathrooms, and additional rooms. Also described are the children attending the program, the program staff, and the daily schedule and curriculum. Teaching methods are highlighted, with a focus on the kindergarten's unique approach to health education involving water treatments. The report further provides information on services for children with special needs, and on teacher training and compensation. The report concludes with a discussion of changes in the educational system since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and a comparison of programs for young children in Belarus and the United States. (KB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 430 731

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

A Visit to Kindergarten No. 490

in Minsk, Belarus

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Linda Good
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Linda A. Good, Ph. D.

Associate Professor

Human Development, Consumer, and Family Sciences

South Dakota State University

PS 027685

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Running Title: Kindergarten #490

Until recently, there were barriers to learning about early childhood education in the Eastern European nations. Barriers such as language and politics, including the cold war, were not conducive to sharing information between the United States and the nations of the Soviet Union. However, when Soviet policies softened and particularly when the Soviet Union disbanded in 1991, doors to information sharing were opened. Although the peoples of the newly independent states and the people of the United States are eager to learn from each other, we still don't know very much about one another's systems of early childhood education.

What we know about how young children are cared for and educated in the Eastern nations is limited. However, we do know a few things. Early childhood care and education are well established in countries of the former Soviet Union. Services for both typical and atypical children have a long history in these Eastern European nations. Kreusler (1970) reports that preschools were established in czarist Russia, and "Russia established a kindergarten for preschoolers with disabilities at the turn of the century" (Graves and Gargiulo, 1994, p. 208).

Tudge (1991) reports the existence of nurseries for infants to three-year-olds and kindergartens for children from three to seven years of age. Elementary school typically begins with grade 1 for seven-year-

olds. However, in the 1980's, grade zero, a transitional program for children between kindergarten and grade 1, was established. This program allows children who turn six by April 30 to attend public school (Amonashvili, 1989).

Until 1959, nurseries were administered by the Ministry of Health and kindergartens were administered by the Ministry of Education. But after 1959, a curriculum with strictly defined objectives for children from age one to age seven was outlined for each year by the Academies of Pedagogic and Medical Science. A daily schedule of activities was also provided such that education in the kindergartens was to be concerned with physical, mental, moral, and aesthetic development (Kruesler, 1970). Graves and Gargiulo (1994, p. 206) state that "kindergarten classes operate six days a week during hours that accommodate working parents".

While theorists like Russian developmental psychologist Vygotsky advocate that play should be the basis of the curriculum for preschoolers, recent reports indicate that learning activities are structured, regimented, and teacher-led (Graves and Garguilo, 1994). It has been reported by Tudge (1991) that preparation for schooling begins when six-year-olds are taught reading and arithmetic.

Now that our nations have allowed more access to one another's institutions, there is a need to find out more about how young children are cared for and educated in the newly independent states. Has the educational system changed to reflect a more national, regional, or local influence? Does the government continue to support early education? Have events such as the Chernobyl nuclear disaster impacted the curriculum or special education services in the republic of Belarus?

I had the opportunity to visit Kindergarten No. 490 in Minsk, Belarus when I was on a trip with Friendship Force. Because Friendship Force is an international organization that strives to promote peace through understanding, accommodations were made for me to meet with Director of Kindergarten No. 490, Nina Bystritskaya, and the curriculum specialist for the region, Tatyana Bratskaya. They graciously gave me a tour of the Kindergarten No. 490 facilities and met with me to answer some of my questions about early childhood education in Belarus.

The Facilities:

Kindergarten No. 490 is located in the city of Minsk in the state of Belarus. It is a large building that is not differentiated from the many cement structures of Minsk. The exterior appears rather stark, which is typical of post World War II architecture in Belarus. The building is not

identified by a sign or a building marker.

The grounds consist of some grassy areas and some cement-paved areas. The outdoor area is fenced. Trees and shrubs are present. Playground equipment is sparse.

The interior of the building is divided into four-room complexes for groups of twenty children each plus rooms for the specialists, a teachers' resource room, and the director's office.

The children's complexes are attractive, bright, and inviting. There is an entry room, a classroom/playroom, a bedroom, and a bathroom. Rooms are clean, well-lit, and spacious. Hardwood floors are enhanced by area rugs. Plants, fishtanks, and statues at the child's height bring a homeyness as well as an aesthetic quality to the classroom environment. Professional art adorns the walls.

The entry room is furnished with lockers for the children. It is a small room that acts as a buffer zone between the classroom and the hallway.

The children's playroom/classroom is divided into different areas: the table area where five small tables and accompanying chairs are arranged together, learning centers which are placed along the walls, a gross motor area with slide and climbing equipment, and a carpeted area

for play. Toys are organized together according to curricular area. The classroom/playroom is equipped with a variety of toys which are displayed on low, open shelves. Stacking toys, blocks, books, and musical toys can be seen. Child-sized furniture consists mostly of tables, chairs, and toyshelves. Tricycles, wooden rocking horses, and a child-sized slide are present in the large classroom/playroom. Supplies such as paper and crayons are available. Unlike the typical classrooms in the United States, there were no signs of paints or easels, sand or water play areas, mathematical manipulatives, or science materials. Playdoh or other sensory materials were not observed. No children's work was displayed.

The sleeproom invites each child to rest in his/her own bed complete with feather comforter, bedspread, and feather pillow. The younger children sleep in small, child-sized beds. The older preschoolers have wooden bunkbeds. Beds are placed side-by-side in groups of two and are also placed end-to-end so that there are two group of four beds, a walking space, another two groups of four beds and a walking space, etc... Lace curtains in this bedroom environment contribute to a homelike atmosphere.

The children's bathroom has three child-sized sinks and toilets. The doors to the toilet stalls are painted with flowers. Each child has his/her

own personal cloth towel which is hung on a peg in a narrow wooden locker in the bathroom. Hairbrushes for each child are stored in the bathroom. One open shower with a hand-held shower hose is available in the bathroom.

Besides the four-room suites for each age group, there are additional areas that the children visit in the school. These include the physical education room, the swimming pool area, the music room, and a computer room.

There is a physical education room that has climbing equipment, mats, balance beams, ropes to climb, and special texture boards for children to walk on. There is also a variety of balls, hula hoops, juggling pins, and plastic bowling pins and balls.

In another area of the school, there is a swimming pool that is about 15 inches deep---a depth appropriate for children to feel safe but allow for swimming. There are no diving boards present. The tiled pool room contains water toys, tubes, kickboards, hula hoops, and balls for water play. Adjacent to the pool are locker rooms for the children to use and an office for the swimming instructor. Because it is considered natural for young children, the children swim in the nude. Children are not separated by sex for the swimming lessons. The swimming instruction is playful in

nature and children are encouraged to splash, jump through a hula hoop, and kick against the side of the pool.

The music room has a piano. Chairs are formally placed against the walls with a large open space in the middle of the music rooms. Some stuffed animals are present. Professional artwork adorns the walls.

Although there was a computer room, I did not have the opportunity to personally observe this space.

In addition to the interior spaces designed for children, there is an office for the Director which is furnished in typical office furnishings. There is also a teachers' resource room that has some bookshelves with resource books and a table and chairs.

The Children:

Two hundred and sixty children attend this kindergarten. They range in age from 2-7 years of age. Not all children attend kindergarten, but there is a large waiting list for this facility. Unlike the public schools of Belarus, the children do not wear uniforms in the preschool. Because I visited during the summer, I observed many children wearing shorts and shirts.

The Staff:

The kindergarten is staffed by twenty-five teachers/caregivers plus

specialists who instruct in music, physical education, swimming, and computers. A director coordinates the staff. A medical doctor is also on staff.

The Daily Schedule and Curriculum:

When asked about the activities at the kindergarten, Director Nina Bystritskaya said: "They just live here and have the funnest time of life here."

The Director described the state program as being very strict. The state requires a morning program, a walk outside, a day program, and an evening program. The curriculum addresses all areas of a child's development. School begins early---at 6:45 A.M.---and corresponds with the workers' schedules in the enterprises and businesses. Although the schoolday begins with quiet games and conversations, there are also active games for active children. Some children choose to engage in work at the beginning of the schoolday. Physical exercises referred to as "morning exercises" are a regular part of the daily schedule. At about 8:15 A.M., the children have breakfast. After breakfast, the children have lessons in mathematics, literature, and language arts. Physical training, art, and music lessons are offered. Because readiness for school begins in the kindergartens, the curriculum prepares children to learn to read and

write. A walk outside follows the morning academic program. After lunch, the children nap, have a snack, and then begin the afternoon program which includes an afternoon walk. Supper is served just before dismissal. The schoolday lasts until 7:30 P.M. Two sets of caregivers (a set consists of a teacher plus an "upbringer"), in two six-hour workshifts, care for each group of 20 children each day.

Teaching Methods:

The curriculum is based on the interests of the children. Motivating a child to want to learn is the focus of the program. A child's interests are honored as children choose whether to participate in activities or not.

The practices of the kindergartens of Belarus are based on the theories of Vygotsky and Piaget. However, the methods used to implement these theories within the classrooms are influenced by some of their own pedogologists.

There are several methods used in Belarus when teaching young children. One method used is based on the work of Shuleshko. Shuleshko's methods encourage the teachers to enter the world of the child, to take on a child's perspective. Teachers are to respect the child's choice regarding participation; no child is to be forced into an activity. Because Shuleshko recommends working with small groups of children, teachers divides each

class into small groups of 6 children. Each group has a designated child leader. The teacher then assigns problem solving tasks to the groups and the children work together to seek solutions.

Another method is based on the work of Dr. Ivanova Krylova. She encourages individual interaction between the teacher and each child in the classroom. This technique promotes self-esteem and builds confidence in each child so that each child can feel successful when s/he enters a group situation.

This particular kindergarten uses an unique approach to its health curriculum. It employs the use of cold water to help students remain healthy. Each day of the year, regardless of the season, a teacher and her young students go outside in their underwear and bathing suits and pour cold water over their bodies. This process is completed in a ritualistic manner, with teacher and students stretching arms out to their sides and looking skyward. Then each takes a bucket of icy cold water and pours it over each of his/her own head until all water has been emptied from each bucket. This practice is based on a theory by Porfiriy Ivanov.

The people of Belarus are afflicted with the aftermath of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Radiation presents a major health problem in Belarus. When people believe in Ivanov's water treatment, it is considered

to be the best medicine. Cures for cancer, tuberculosis, and other illnesses are attributed to the water treatment. Children participate in this method at school and it is extended as a parent participation activity in the homes.

Serving Children with Special Needs:

The curriculum specialist for the region, Tatyana Bratskaya, informed me about the services for children who have special needs. In Belarus, when a child has been identified as having a disability, that child is given a document that admits the child to a special education kindergarten. In the region of Gomel, there is a higher population of children who suffer from the radiation of Chernobyl, so more special education kindergartens are located there. However, the kindergarten director, Nina Bystritskaya, said that she believes that young children with disabilities should be integrated with their typically developing peers and that they should be treated in the same way. For example, a child who has a profound vision problem is currently enrolled at Kindergarten No. 490. Children with speech and language delays are also enrolled there. Nlna believes that the teachers must recognize that children who are experiencing delayed development can function and succeed in this normalized setting.

Teacher Training:

In order to become a kindergarten teacher, preparation requires four or five years of higher education in a teacher education institute or university. Teachers must complete an additional course of study for continuing education every five years to remain in the teaching field. Most of the personnel who work in kindergarten are female; men in early childhood education are the exception in Belarus.

Teacher Compensation:

Teachers in the kindergartens of Belarus are paid approximately $15 per month for working 6 days per week for 6 hours per day. Salaries are fluctuating monthly due to the current inflation and instability since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. At this time, workers in factories make more money than teachers.

Changes Since the Dissolution of the Soviet Union:

Some changes have occurred since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. For one thing, there is no longer a Soviet program. Instead, there is a Belarussian state kindergarten program called pereska. Another change is that teachers' salaries fluctuate from month to month due to the current inflation in Belarus. A third, and very positive change, is that kindergartens are protected by law. These businesses cannot be abandoned

or closed because the Belarussian people value their children.

Comparisons across Cultures:

There are similarities and differences between programs for young children in Belarus and in the United States. Similarities include: play-based environments that address the developmental needs of young children, indoor and outdoor activities, and programming that meets the physical needs of nourishment, exercise, and rest. Teachers in both nations are underpaid for the valuable services they provide. Programming in both countries is influenced by the work of Piaget and Vygotsky.

Differences are reflected in the stricter requirements for training of professional staff for the Belarussian kindergartens because the childcare program is also an educational program. Specialists are employed in the Belarussian kindergartens to teach art, music, swimming, and computers. While most childcare centers in the United States do not employ specialists, this is a common practice of North American elementary schools. The presence of a medical doctor on staff at the Belarussian kindergartens is another difference.

The curriculum is dictated in Belarus; teachers in the United States have much more freedom regarding curricular decisions. The Belarussian curriculum stresses school readiness skills and offers a structured art

curriculum. The health curriculum of this particular kindergarten might be viewed as controversial in the United States.

While the inclusion of children with handicapping conditions is an enforced practice in the United States, this is just beginning in Belarussian kindergartens. Most children with special needs are provided services in special education kindergartens in Belarus.

The physical environments differ. The classroom environments in the United States often show more child ownership through displays of children's artwork. The walls of childcare centers in the United States are cluttered with bulletin boards, commercial posters, and print. The walls in the Belarussian kindergarten were reserved for professional artwork. Also there is a greater diversity and abundance of toys, equipment, and open access to supplies like paper, pencils, markers, paints, etc... in the United States.

The sleeprooms of the Belarussian kindergartens are much more inviting, homey, and relaxing than the typical portable cots offered in play areas to young children in the United States.

The gender identified bathrooms of the United States differ from the unisex toileting areas of the Belarussian kindergartens. The attitudes toward child nudity differ between the two nations.

While the majority of childcare facilities in the United States are private enterprises, the governmental support for Belarussian kindergartens contributes to the quality of the programs there.

Conclusion:

Now that political barriers have been lifted, we can begin to exchange more information about early childhood education between the United States and the newly independent states. Although there are many similarities between early childhood education systems in our nations, there are also some unique differences. By sharing the unique perspectives that each culture has, we have the potential of opening more doors to understanding and may find that we have new things to learn from one another that will help each of us to grow professionally.

References

Amonashvili, S.A. (1989). Hello, children. A Teacher's Guide. Soviet Education, 30 (4), p. 9-109.

Graves, Stephen B. and Gargiulo, Richard M. (Summer, 1994). Early Childhood Education in Three Eastern European Countries. Childhood Education, 70 (4), p. 205-209.

Kreusler, Abraham. (May, 1970). Soviet Preschool Education. The Elementary School Journal, 70 (8), p. 429-437.

Tudge, Jonathan. (1991). Education of Young Children in the Soviet Union: Current Practice in Historical Perspective. The Elementary School Journal, 92 (1), p. 121-133.